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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000565

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SUBJECT: TURKEY/ARMENIA: GOVERNMENT TRIES TO REGAIN
FOOTING; OPPOSITION SMELLS WEAKNESS

REF: ANKARA 553

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Turkish government is trying to steady itself in the storm over negotiations to normalize relations and open the border with Armenia. MFA and parliamentary officials have canceled participation at public conferences on the topic both in Ankara and Baku. Erdogan has not spoken to the press on the issue since his ill-advised remarks April 10 that the border could not be opened until Armenia resolves its conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K). FM Babacan on April 16 underscored Turkey's desire to normalize relations with Armenia and inched away from pre-conditionality, saying the process should move forward "simultaneously" with N-K negotiations. While seeking to regain control over this debate, the GOT is incurring criticism from both supporters and opponents of the rapprochement with Armenia who accuse it of failing to explain adequately to the public its policy objectives and rationale. The opposition, emboldened by better-than-expected results in March 29 local elections, has filled the void, drowning what should be a serious policy debate with vitriol about "treasonous" concessions made at the behest of outside powers. Unfortunately, that is what often passes for serious foreign policy debate here. It soon may be time for the government to speak clearly to the public about why normalizing relations with Armenia is good for Turkey. END SUMMARY.

THE GOVERNMENT SHUTS UP (MOSTLY)

12. (C) Recognizing, perhaps, that they were able to make considerable progress in their negotiations with Armenia when the modalities of any such agreement were closely held, the Turks have finally stopped talking so much about the issue. Asked about Armenia/Azerbaijan April 14 at the airport en route to Bahrain, President Gul said: "Plenty of statements have already been made. To solve the Azerbaijan-Armenia question all countries, especially Russia and the United States, are helping. Discussions open to the public are not conducive to the conduct of diplomacy. The goal is to normalize relations in the Caucasus." Talks with Armenia, he said, continue. PM Erdogan has stayed out of the fray since his April 10 remarks that the border could not be opened until Armenia resolves its conflict with Azerbaijan, which was echoed widely by other government and ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) officials. Prime Ministry U/S Hakan Fidan, MFA Deputy U/S Cevikoz, and AKP MP Suat Kiniklioglu canceled at the last minute their participation at an April 14 Turkish Economic and Political Research Foundation

(TEPAV)-hosted conference on Turkey's Caucasus policy and the government turned off a parliamentary visit to Baku, where a conference was planned on N-K and related issues.

13. (C) Parliament Speaker Toptan broke a short-lived silence April 15, while hosting a visiting delegation of female MPs from Azerbaijan. He said the border with Armenia could not be opened while there were "one million displaced Karabakh people trying to survive." However, he went on to say that while normalizing relations with Armenia is not easy, it would be good if relations improved. "Discussing all problems with Armenia, one of which is Karabakh, does not cause any weakness in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, and it does not mean that Turkey is making concessions on the issue." He said Turkey's views are very clear and obvious and that no one knew when those discussions would be completed or whether they would bear any fruit." FM Babacan, en route to Yerevan to attend the BSEC Ministerial (a visit that was only confirmed at 6:40 PM on April 15 after many rumors he would not attend and much urging by us to do so), underscored Turkey's desire to normalize fully relations with Armenia and inched away from pre-conditionality, saying the process should move forward "simultaneously with N-K negotiations." The latter is an ever-so-slight softening as "negotiations" are constantly ongoing. More helpfully, Babacan took along his number two, U/S Apakan, the main negotiator with Armenia.

AND THE OPPOSITION DOESN'T

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14. (C) Sensing weakness and emboldened by their better-than-expected (though still distant second and third place) showing in local election results, opposition party leaders have sought to fill the void, hammering the government for policy mismanagement and selling out Azerbaijan. Meeting with his parliamentary group April 14, Republican People's Party (CHP) Chairman Deniz Baykal said Turkish and Azerbaijani nervousness stem from Turkey's closed door diplomacy. He argued that it was not possible to solve the border issue while Armenia continues to press genocide claims and occupy twenty percent of Azerbaijan. Addressing the government, he said, "You know how to attend a football game, but you don't know how to conduct diplomacy." Happy to ridicule the government for backing out of the TEPAV conference where he remained a panelist, CHP Vice Chairman Onur Oymen accused the government of abandoning its principles by not insisting on Armenian withdrawal from occupied Azerbaijan. The demands to open the border, he alleged, are coming from Europe and the U.S. and under the pressure of genocide recognition.

15. (C) Nationalist Action Party (MHP) Chairman Devlet Bahceli upped the rancor, telling his parliamentary group April 14, "A surrendering attitude is dominating Turkey's foreign policy. Countries are taking advantage of AKP's indifference and have started imposing demands in every field, including Cyprus, Armenia, Halki Seminary, the "so-called Ecumenical" Greek Orthodox Patriarch, relations with Iraqi "tribal leaders," and "international duties" for Turkish troops in the fight against terrorism. Accusing he government of "endless concessions," he fumed that Brussels, Washington, Yerevan and Erbil were working in synch with the government to "speed up treason." The government, he went on, became hostage to its own policy developments, dragged to the point of unilaterally establishing relations with Armenia under the disguise of obstructing baseless genocide allegations. The AKP "is hurting the honor of the Turkish people."

A PERFECT STORM

16. (C) Over the past week, the GOT has skillfully managed to disturb both supporters and opponents of normalizing

relations with Armenia. Both sides sense policy confusion and are demanding that the government speak clearly to the public about its goals and objectives. TEPAV International Policy Research Institute Director Mustafa Aydin, who supports a change in Turkish policy on Armenia in order to allow Turkey to more effectively engage and promote stability in the region, lampooned the government April 14 for engaging in "televolley," responding to allegations in the Azerbaijani media that are based on misreporting and speculation in the Turkish media that arise from contradictory and incomplete information from government officials.

17. (C) Relations with Azerbaijan have taken center stage, but once again, even supporters of normalizing Armenia relations are finding plenty to complain about. Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) Director Hasan Kanbolat maintains that the Azerbaijan crisis could have been ameliorated if Turkey actually had an Azerbaijan policy. There has been little to no strategic coordination on key priorities, such as N-K, Russia or Iran. Indeed, Turkey and Azerbaijan have been increasingly divergent on Russia and Iran (not to mention the crucial issue of gas -- see reftel). Trade relations have remained anemic and Turkey has not even tried to promote its democratic values in Azerbaijan. Most importantly, in its opening to Armenia, Turkey failed to lay the groundwork with the Azerbaijani people. It is no surprise, he argued, that they have reacted so negatively.

18. (C) Mainstream media focus has shifted to the politics of the Armenia issue with little discussion of what is in Turkey's interests, though with some notable exceptions. Omer Taspinar, in mainstream "Sabah," April 13, cautioned Ankara not to relax and urged the GOT to complete the normalization process with Armenia as soon as possible, arguing that an April 24 crisis will put Turkey in a worse situation than it was in before. Semih Idiz, in mainstream "Milliyet," April 10, underscored the risks of mixing diplomacy and populism by linking the normalization process with Armenia to N-K.

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COMMENT: TIME TO SPEAK CLEARLY?

19. (C) Quieting down may be a necessary first step for the GOT to regain its footing on this issue. However, the GOT will, at some point, need to sell an agreement to its public. While GOT officials protest that Turkey's policy is clear, it really is not and a head-in-the-sand approach gives the opposition free range to crowd TV and newspapers with its bombast. Absent substantive information, the media will likely remain focused on the "who lost Azerbaijan" argument, which is exactly where the nationalist opposition prefers to play.

10. (C) There are compelling arguments the GOT can make in support of normalizing relations with Armenia that go beyond deflecting genocide recognition, not least Turkey's strategic interest in promoting stability in the Caucasus and turning itself into a positive actor on N-K instead of an ineffectual bystander. Moreover, the Turkish public will at some point need to be informed -- though a few journalists have already reported this -- that the Armenian side is prepared to make significant concessions of its own on key Turkish priorities. (Of course, Armenian nervousness about details -- especially those that would help the GOT -- leaking out before April 24 complicates the Turks' calculus of whether or when to go public.) Released April 14, the International Crisis Group report on Turkey and Armenia and its balanced recommendations may provide a framework for the two sides to speak clearly to their publics in support of a deal.

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Jeffrey